

In defence of Generation Y...

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As a recruitment trainer, one of the points I strive to make with my trainees, is that no generation is better or worse than another, they are all just different. Each generation is characterised by different strengths as well as weaknesses, and it is imperative that we, as recruiters (particularly in the graduate market), help employers to avoid viewing a generation purely in the context of its weaknesses.

Let's face it, we can't simply remove the Gen Y population from the workforce. It sounds like a sweeping statement, but many employers, on some level, seem to entertain such wishful thinking. How is a naïve view like this going to help the situation? The "Don't hire Gen Y" attitude is not a solution – it is an unrealistic cop-out.

Rather, recruiters should encourage client employers to consider this approach as a solution when dealing with generational issues: "Channel the weakness into a strength." By this I mean that from every perceived weakness a Gen Y has, a strength can be moulded.

Let's take the common frustration with Gen Y's as the "I can do anything" generation. As a trainer, I have had to mentor many Baby Boomer employees, who simply lack the confidence to implement new concepts that they learn. Baby Boomers can sometimes have a very strong aversion to change, which can make them difficult employees.

Not so for Gen Y's. They believe they can succeed, and so ... they succeed! Gen Y's tackle new concepts with enthusiasm, and sink their teeth into fresh ideas; they are not fazed by technology changes, systems change or schedules change. As an employer, I am more than willing to shrug a little cockiness and even arrogance because I know that the self-confidence and enthusiasm of Gen Y employees play a huge part in moving my company forward. "I can do anything" is a positive attitude that Baby Boomers could

certainly learn from. Point out these simple truths to your sceptical client/prospect, and it may result in a significant shift of thinking on their part.

Many career experts tell us that Gen Y's are paranoid about the diversity of their skills base, because they want to have the luxury of jumping from employer to employer. Coupled with this, such experts believe, is a selfishness that causes them to job-hop, without care for their employers or work.

However, where does this selfishness stem from? The answer is simple – Gen Y's don't believe that the employer cares about them and so the problem works both ways ... something has to give.

For employers, the answer lies in simple common sense: if they want their Gen Y employees to care, then they need to give them reasons to care!

This can be achieved by the employer simply showing the Gen Y employee that they do, in fact, care. I guarantee that once this happens, the employee will respond. Many employers seem to think that they have to entice and impress Gen Y's by offering high tech prizes and incentives, such as ipods and mobiles. Who said that courtesy had to be so expensive?

Encourage your clients to take time to acknowledge their achievements, provide help when they need it, develop and broaden their skills through practical and interactive training. Their need to be cared about is, in many ways, a strength. I remember one particular situation when working as a consultant, where I was faced with a Baby Boomer client, who told me that he was struggling with these, "selfish, demanding little kids". (His words not mine!). This was my response: "Think about it – they take their work for you seriously enough to want to develop a relationship with you. Isn't that a good thing?"

Indeed, it is also important for employers to remember that Gen Y's are still young,

and not used to the pressures of the modern workplace. Many of the problems associated with this generation (arrogance, selfishness, disloyalty) can be seen as strengths, as they are necessary self-protections in the face of a life that is new to these individuals. Thirteen years of school (and three or four years of university) does not provide realistic grounding for a life in the workforce, and employers need to understand this. It is up to the employer to nurture and mentor Gen Y employees, so that they no longer need to hide behind arrogance or selfishness.

The "Don't Hire Gen Y" attitude is one of the greatest challenges the graduate recruitment market faces today. But I maintain that irrational attitudes such as these can be overcome quite easily, if those who hold the attitudes are encouraged to think about the issues involved from a different perspective. Therefore, I encourage recruiters in the graduate market to take what I have written here, and use it to help provide their clients and prospects with a new perspective on Generation Y.

As we have seen, many Gen Y weaknesses are potential strengths. If we, as recruiters, ensure that employers understand this, then we can free the workforce from unrealistic, counterproductive attitudes such as "Don't hire Gen Y". ■



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